Speculation and Esotericism in Schopenhauer's Philosophy

Jonathan Head

This paper considers the question of the speculative nature of Schopenhauer's philosophy. In order to illuminate this issue, aspects of his conception of the aims and methods of philosophy will be investigated, with a particular focus upon the extent to which his system lies within the philosophical esoteric tradition. It will be argued that Schopenhauer's works recognisably stand in the tradition of pedagogical esotericism, involving engagement in reflection that at least touches upon the mystical and speculative.

Keywords: Schopenhauer, Metaphilosophy, Esotericism, Mysticism, Rationalism.

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1. Introduction

One of the many interpretive questions currently left open by Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation* is that of the speculative nature of his philosophy and, as a related issue, his stance towards his Kantian heritage. In his identification of the thing-in-itself with will, Schopenhauer has been accused of making illegitimate claims concerning that which is beyond our understanding, according to his own epistemology, which limits our knowledge to that which forms part of the world of our experience. Further, in his claims concerning the denial or negation of the will, he has been held to indulge in a kind of mysticism that again violates his own rules about what is legitimately philosophy and what is mere speculation. In this paper, I wish to explore the extent to which Schopenhauer's philosophy is speculative, and to consider his own understanding of these aspects of his work.

The paper falls into two main parts. First, I will consider Schopenhauer's metaphilosophical[1] reflections regarding communicating ideas and his philosophical style, guided by the hypothesis that *The World as Will and Repre-*

[1] Though very little turns on my definition of "metaphilosophy", I generally understand a metaphilosophy as a conception of the aims and methods of philosophy.

sentation [*WWR*], at least in part, offers an example of a pedagogical esoteric text. Given a potential placing of his texts in the tradition of pedagogical esotericism, we can see Schopenhauer as giving careful consideration to how he structures the text and uses a variety of rhetorical devices, in order to ensure that his audience are able to garner the insights and practical benefits that are potentially accessible through the metaphysics of will.

Following this, I will review Schopenhauer's claims concerning the speculative nature of his philosophy, with a focus upon the notion of illuminism. I will argue that Schopenhauer sees his philosophy as involving an interplay of rationalism and illuminism, with the latter acting as a "hidden compass", implicitly guiding his philosophical reflections and ensuring that he does not stray too far from the data of his experience. He seeks to find an epistemological "middle way" between mere speculation and a purely immanent philosophy that is constrained to what is directly available to us in experience alone. The consequences of this metaphilosophical approach to Schopenhauer's work is that we should approach the text of *WWR* with its esoteric nature in mind, including its use of non-literal and emotive writing, and the intended interplay of rationalism and mystical illuminism in reflecting upon the metaphysics of will.

2. Pedagogical esotericism and the "single thought"

The first question I wish to consider in this paper is the extent to which Schopenhauer stands in the esoteric tradition of philosophical writing. Of course, we must tread carefully here, for esotericism is a multifaceted phenomenon, so we would have to identify the specific sense in which Schopenhauer's writings could be said to be esoteric. The question of the extent of esoteric writing in the philosophical tradition is also up for debate. Nevertheless, gaining a greater understanding of the way in which his works could be esoteric may in turn give further insight into Schopenhauer's metaphilosophy, as well as his place in the history of philosophy, in that we may wish to reconsider the strength of influence upon Schopenhauer from esoteric textual sources.

To guide our reflections, Melzer[2] has identified four major forms of philosophical esotericism, each of which may be found in combination with others within a given thinker's philosophical works, and I argue that we can find

[2] A. Melzer, *Philosophy Between the Lines: The Lost History of Esoteric Writing*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2014, pp. 90-92.

one of these forms most prominently in Schopenhauer's work. "Pedagogical esotericism" arises partly out of pessimistic assumptions regarding the potential social impact of philosophy: society, taken as a whole, will always be fundamentally irrational, and thus no effort on the part of philosophers will be sufficient to bring about genuine change in the idealised direction of a new, enlightened society. Given such a view of the relation between philosophy and society, the intended function of philosophical texts changes: Melzer writes,

> «Since the conflictual view [i.e., the assumption of irresolvable conflict between philosophy and an inevitably irrational society] excludes any hope for fundamental political transformation through the genuine and lasting enlightenment of the general population, that cannot be the purpose (although more limited hopes for partial and temporary reform might be an aim). Thus, the primary purpose of writing philosophical books is reduced to this: the education of the gifted, potentially philosophical individual»[3].

Philosophical texts written with the pedagogical form of esotericism in mind, then, will have an initially limited audience and impact, with the insights gained from a given philosophy (alongside their associated practical and theoretical benefits) restricted to a small number of people who have heightened gifts of nature. In Schopenhauer's view[4], these would be those with a surplus of intellectual capacity[5], alongside various other necessities for being a good reader of philosophical texts, such as a certain amount of patience and open-mindedness.

However, pedagogical esotericism also proposes an approach to philosophical education that encompasses both theory and praxis:

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[3] A. Melzer, *Philosophy Between the Lines*, cit., p. 91.

[4] Full details of the editions of Schopenhauer's works and abbreviations used in this paper are in footnotes, with *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Schopenhauer* preferred, where available. Page references to those texts that form part of the *Cambridge Edition*, as well as to the Longman edition of *The World as Will and Representation: Volume 2*, are (following scholarly convention) to the pagination of Hübscher's German edition: A. Schopenhauer, *Sämtliche Werke in 7 Bänden*, ed. A. Hübscher, F. A. Brockhaus, Leipzig 1937. References to this edition are in the margins of the relevant works. Otherwise, references are to the translation used.

[5] Schopenhauer argues that a philosophical attitude is tied to a high level of intelligence: «the philosophical sense of wonder that arises from this in certain individuals is conditioned by a higher development of intelligence» (A. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Presentation: vol. 2*, trans. Carus & Aquila, Pearson Longman, London 2008, p. 176 [WWR2]).

«A philosophical education is not simply intellectual, a pure matter of learning. It involves facilitating a transition from one way of life to another – indeed, to a life that is, on the conflictual view, fundamentally different from and opposed to the life one starts with. It requires a difficult conversion that shakes one to the core»[6].

Thus, the pedagogical esoteric has a view of a successful philosophical education as bringing about a fundamental change in the individual, who will not only undergo an alteration in their core beliefs, but also their fundamental nature or character, such that they will lead an entirely new kind of life.

Such a view of philosophical education will have wide-ranging implications for how one goes about writing a philosophical text. Due to the fundamental change in the individual that the author is trying to instigate through their writing, some form of implicit "nudging" will be required, underlying whatever doctrines might be presented on the surface, in the same way that a political esoteric will attempt to influence wider society through a kind of gentle influence that amounts to subterfuge. As Melzer puts it, on this view of the intended impact of philosophical texts, a writer must be careful not to reveal their thoughts too directly:

«[An] open and straightforward approach to [philosophical] education that simply lays out the truth will not work. The student must be moved along gradually, artfully, in appropriate stages. This dialectical process will require withholding or managing the truth, so that the student is compelled to find it for himself, at his pace, and in a form he can, at each stage, digest»[7].

A philosophical text constructed in this manner will be carefully planned, and have a gradual narrative arc to it, in which the reader is gently led along from perhaps more conventional views towards a deep philosophical insight which is internalised to the extent that it has a fundamental impact upon the life and character of the individual engaging with the text.

I argue that *The World as Will and Representation*, where Schopenhauer outlines his metaphysics of will, is a clear example of such a carefully constructed text. The reader is led from perhaps more comfortable ground in Book 1, a Kantian-style analysis of the necessary features of everyday experience, slowly towards perhaps more unsettling claims, beginning with the identification of the thing in itself with will in Book 2, which retains Kantian language, yet seeks to extend Kant's epistemic limits to metaphysical claims that he would not have

[6] A. Melzer, *Philosophy Between the Lines*, cit., p. 91.
[7] *Ibid.*

allowed, alongside the claim that the physical body is a manifestation of will. Things become even stranger in Book 3, where Platonic language is used to explicate an account of aesthetic experience that gives deep metaphysical significance to the possibility of engaging with works of art. Finally, in Book 4, Schopenhauer comes to the more unconventional, less familiar aspects of his thought, ending with the unintelligible, mystical doctrine of the negation of the will (the postulation of a kind of experience in which one's individual will is negated through a recognition of the interconnected, suffering nature of all things in reality, with the effect that for such an individual «the rest of the world would fade into nothing»[8]). Such an argumentative strategy could not have worked the other way around: that is, Schopenhauer could not have begun with a statement of the negation of the will, as the vast majority of readers would have immediately put the book back on the shelf, dismissing the system presented there as speculative nonsense. By placing his examination of the negation of the will at the end of the book, preceded by accounts of less extreme versions of that phenomenon centred on the familiar philosophical topics of art and morality, Schopenhauer prepares the ground for his readers, such that they will be more likely to engage with the discussion presented and attempt to understand and internalise the insights found in the text for themselves.

To an extent, then, Schopenhauer withholds the truth from his readers, in the sense that the progression of the argument of *WWR* does not make the strange end-point of his system clear until the reader is prepared for it. The truth is "managed", in that the conceptualisation of philosophical insights in the terminology of the metaphysics of will is carefully constructed: familiar terminology is used alongside unfamiliar ideas, some stemming from Indian philosophy, which readers in the West may not be comfortable with if expressed in their original terms. The text is also intended to leave some work to the reader themselves, in that they will have to take an active approach towards retrieving the original insights underlying the conceptual presentation of the philosophical system in the text. The reader will be able to proceed at their own pace, and may have to read the text repeatedly in order to gain the inspiration required to discover philosophical insight themselves, and in fact Schopenhauer tells us to approach his texts in such a way.

[8] A. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation: vol. 1*, ed. and trans. Norman, Welchman & Janaway, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2010, p. 407 [WWR1].

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One particularly important passage in this regard falls in the *Preface* to the first edition of *WWR*, where Schopenhauer states that he wishes to specify «how this book is to be read so as to be understood»[9], thus highlighting his reflections upon how the reader is to approach the text in order to garner its philosophical insights. He tells us that the work «aims to convey a single thought… considered from different sides, [revealing] itself respectively as what has been called metaphysics, what has been called ethics, and what has been called aesthetics»[10]. As we read *WWR*, then, we will be introduced to a unified philosophical system based around a single thought, which will only be fully illuminated until it has been considered from different sides, construed as the major areas of philosophy.

Schopenhauer writes that the organic nature of the system presented[11], unified by a single thought, alongside «the extremely close connections between all of the parts» of the text, has required him «to leave it in four main parts, four perspectives, as it were, on the one thought»[12]. Despite the perspectival nature of the text, as it moves from one part to another, we must endeavour to ensure that we always seek to keep the unified nature of the text (and the system which it explicates) in mind as we read it: «The reader must be particularly careful not to lose sight of the principal thought in the associated details that need to be treated along with it, or of the progress of the presentation as a whole»[13]. Thus, the reader has quite a complex project on their hands, if they wish to fully grasp the significance of the text presented[14] and the single thought which it presents, in

[9] WWR1, p. vii.
[10] WWR1, p. vii.
[11] Wicks notes the connection between Schopenhauer's understanding of his system as having organic unity with its claimed source in an intuitive insight: «Schopenhauer conceives of philosophical activity as a more immediately visionary enterprise, where all of the vision's components present themselves as a single, integrated insight, like a ready-formed organism» (R. Wicks, *Schopenhauer's* The World as Will and Representation*: A Reader's Guide*, Continuum, New York 2011, p. 20). In a sense, the whole of the system is contained within the original insight, such that it has an inbuilt inferential structure, and it is this aspect of the original insight that, I claim, Schopenhauer is trying to capture with the notion of "organic unity". As a result of this, as Wicks argues (R. Wicks, *Schopenhauer's* The World as Will and Representation, cit., pp. 19-22), Schopenhauer is keen to emphasise the distinction between his system and other kinds of metaphysical system, such as a Spinoza-style rationalism where axioms are laid down, followed by propositions which logically follow from them, and a Locke-style empiricism, which begin with a basic set of experiences as a foundation for all further thought.
[12] WWR1, p. ix.
[13] WWR1, p. ix.
[14] Schopenhauer openly admits that he is putting stringent demands on his reader, but reiterates that we should «not waste a single hour with a book that it would be useless to read without fulfilling the stated demands and thus must be left entirely alone» (WWR1, p. xiii). Thus, the

that they not only have to take in the details of each part of the text as it is presented to them, but they also need to bear in mind the unified nature of the system beyond whatever perspective is being taken at that particular moment.

Further explicating the structure of the text of *WWR*, Schopenhauer states that the single thought which unifies the whole system will act as a «foundation stone [which] will ultimately support all the parts without itself being supported by any of them, and the summit will be supported without itself supporting anything», with the effect that the system will have «an architectonic coherence, i.e. a coherence in which one part always supports another without the second supporting the first»[15]. However, the difficulty for Schopenhauer is how to communicate such an intertwined system, where the "foundation stone" may not be immediately obvious and so we may have to progressively illuminate different sides of it before it can be fully comprehended, in the form of a book, where some things have to be put before others, divided into sections and chapters, and so forth: «a book must have a first line and a last, and to this extent will always be different from an organism, however similar they might be in content: as a result, form and matter are in contradiction here»[16]. The structure of a book means that the architectonic system, organically unified by a single thought, needs to be artificially divided up, and, as Schopenhauer explains,

> «[if] it is divided up in order to be communicated, the various parts must still be organically coherent, i.e. each part containing the whole just as much as it is contained by the whole, with no part first and no parts last, the whole thought rendered more distinct through each part, and even the smallest part incapable of being fully understood without a prior understanding of the whole»[17].

So, if Schopenhauer's communication of his unified system is to be successful, each section of the work needs to reflect the single thought just as much as the others, and must be placed with other sections in such a way that they

reader who only intends to make a half-hearted effort with regard to studying *WWR1* should expect to receive very little (if anything) in return: the insights underlying the text will only be garnered through the efforts of an active, open-minded and patient reader.

[15] WWR1, pp. vii-viii.

[16] WWR1, p. viii.

[17] WWR1, p. viii.

successively reveal the various aspects of the single thought as it appears in different areas of philosophical reflection[18].

Further to this, Schopenhauer makes the crucial point that no part of the book will be fully comprehensible until one already has a sense of the text as a whole. On first reading, whilst one will be able to engage with the material to some extent, the deeper significance of what is presented will not be comprehensible until you understand the overall shape of the text, particularly where it is headed to, i.e., its teleological end-point in the negation of the will[19]. Once the salvific scheme underlying the metaphysics of will is grasped, in at least a limited sense, then the reader will be able to return to earlier parts of text with a new perspective upon the different aspects of the single thought presented. The limitations of a linear reading (in which some information is presented after other information, despite it being of equal importance for grasping Schopenhauer's philosophy) can be ultimately overcome by generating an organic understanding of the system as a whole, which is achievable through repeated readings and reflection upon the interconnections between the different parts of the single thought as it is presented in a linear fashion.

The later parts of *WWR* will thus have a deep metaphilosophical impact upon our understanding of the earlier parts of the text and the system as a whole. Take Book 1 of *WWR*, for example: at first reading, it may appear as a pretty straightforward exercise in Kantian epistemology, whereas upon second reading, it gains a deeper significance as describing an illusory form of consciousness which brings great suffering to the individual, and thus is something that can and must be transcended. Given all this, Schopenhauer states that,

«[It] is evident that the only way to completely fathom the thought presented here is to *read the book twice*[20], and in fact with considerable patience the first time, the sort of

[18] We are also warned to expect repetition in the text, due to the fact that the «structure of the whole» is «organic rather than chainlike» (WWR1, p. ix). Schopenhauer's tendency to lapse into repetition is perhaps one of his major failings as a writer, despite his protestations that the repetition is necessary.

[19] On my reading, the "single thought" is the realisation that the world is both will and representation (as encapsulated in the title of Schopenhauer's main work), whilst the summit is the recognition of the only path to salvation available for us, namely, the negation of the will.

[20] The injunction to read *WWR1* at least twice can be taken as an expression of Schopenhauer's arrogance, in that his work is so important that it deserves to be read twice, or as a simple hermeneutical point, to the effect that any text (particularly a philosophical one) can only be fully understood after repeated readings. However, I argue here that what might appear as quite a shallow point on the surface actually has deep significance, in that it is intimately connected with

patience that only comes from a voluntary conviction that the beginning presupposes the end almost as much as the end presupposes the beginning, and similarly that all the earlier parts presuppose the later ones almost as much as the later ones presuppose the earlier»[21].

Whilst there is a sense in which the beginning had to be the beginning, and the end had to be the end, in relation to presenting the system in the most comprehensible order[22], nevertheless the beginning cannot be fully comprehended without some understanding of the end, as the beginning "presupposes" the end, to a certain extent. Thus, the reader must read the text at least twice, in order to ensure that all parts of the text are fully understood and that the reader can thereby grasp the single thought presented in all of its aspects.

With regard to our first reading of the text, Schopenhauer also states that we should read with patience and not pre-judge where the explication of his system is going to follow, despite the tendency of the reader to «[think] not only of what is being said but (which is only natural) of its possible consequences as well»[23], with him worrying that we may impute to him very disagreeable claims that are to follow, whereas he may in fact surprise us with a more agreeable philosophical system. He complains that, «although the painstakingly attained clarity of presentation and expression», which he has successfully achieved in the writing of the text, «leaves no question about the immediate meaning of what is said, such clarity cannot at the same time elucidate the relation between what is being said and everything else»[24], thus leaving him open to pre-emptive misunderstandings on the part of the reader. We, as the reader, must endeavour as much as we can, whilst we read the text, to keep our mind clear of what the deeper significance of the claims being made might be, and where Schopenhauer's argument may be leading to, in order to engage with the text correctly,

Schopenhauer's views of the nature of the communication of philosophy, and the status of the philosophical text presented (as well as the metaphysical system underlying it). Given the evidence presented here, Schopenhauer certainly seems to think that there is something special about his philosophical system, such that it can only be fully comprehended after repeated readings of his philosophical works.

[21] WWR1, p. viii.

[22] Schopenhauer states that he has done all he can to put things in the right order, with a view to aiding the reader through the system, as it is explicated in the text: «anything that could be done to give priority to what is explained only in the sequel – just as in general whatever could facilitate comprehensibility and clarity – has been honestly and conscientiously done» (WWR1, p. viii).

[23] WWR1, pp. viii-ix.

[24] WWR1, p. ix.

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such that we can eventually (after multiple readings of the text) grasp the single thought that unifies his system.

Indeed, a sense of the whole of the system, including its teleological end-point in the negation of the will, will allow us to see the text «in a very different light»[25] when we return to a second reading. Thus, we can see, in Schopenhauer's pronouncements concerning how we should approach *WWR* as reader, the kind of considerations that would concern a pedagogical esoteric (including repeated reading of the text and reflection upon the organic unity of the system contained within), with a particular focus upon how a limited readership can be best prepared to take on the difficult, mysterious insights embodied in the metaphysics of will.

3. Schopenhauer's philosophical style

A further aspect of pedagogical esotericism that we see in Schopenhauer's works is a distinctive use of imagery and rhetoric. Indeed, as Snow emphasises, Schopenhauer's philosophical writing style is remarkably idiosyncratic, which makes it rather difficult to characterise in relation to other philosophical texts, and undeniably powerful[26]:

> «Whatever it is, *The World as Will and Representation* is not a dialogue, a hymn, a *Vorlesung*, a sermon, and so on. Schopenhauer's writing could never be characterised as aphoristic; but neither is his major work a commonplace book. And although Schopenhauer professes that he draws his philosophical inspiration from Plato and Kant, his writing is clearly not imitative of theirs. He did not write dialogues[27], nor critiques, nor prolegomena, nor a *Grundlegung*. The oddity of his work is all the more conspicuous if we compare it to the philosophical/literary forms adopted by Schopenhauer's

[25] WWR1, p. ix.

[26] Schopenhauer's merits as a writer, apart from any that might attach to his philosophy, was recognised early on in his fame. As an example, we have Gryzanovski stating, thirteen years after Schopenhauer's death: «we must apologize no further for introducing to the reader a man like Schopenhauer, who was not only a great thinker, but also a great writer, and whose literary popularity has opened for his philosophical doctrines a far wider sphere of influence than they would have obtained if Schopenhauer had been, like his rival philosophers, a university professor» (E. Gryzanovski, *Arthur Schopenhauer and His Pessimistic Philosophy*, «The North American Review», 117:240, 1873, p. 39).

[27] Snow's claims here are clearly centred on the style of *The World as Will and Representation,* as Schopenhauer does write dialogues at various points. However, I agree with the implication that the style of *WWR* is particularly significant.

contemporaries and immediate predecessors… Schopenhauer's presentation of his philosophy is stylistically unique»[28].

Schopenhauer often uses imagery to point towards philosophical insights, and is not afraid to indulge in rhetorical flourishes, particularly concerning the undesirable form of existence within the world as representation and the endless (non-literal) repetition of time: as an example, he states that we can aid our grasp of the fundamentally unchanging nature of human history, even through the continual flux of birth and death, by thinking of it «in terms of infinitely rapid vibrations»[29], which is how the course of human history would appear to «an incomparably longer living eye, which encompassed the human race in its entire duration in a *single* glance»[30]. To such a being, «the constant exchange of birth and death would display itself as only a continuing vibration», and thus, if we can, through such imagery, attempt to cognize such a standpoint, some philosophical insight may be garnered:

«Rather, just as to our glance the rapidly turning spark appears as an enduring circle, the rapidly vibrating spring as a persisting triangle, the oscillating string as a spindle, so the species would appear to it as that which is and persists, death and birth as vibrations»[31].

Such imagery is, of course, found throughout Schopenhauer's texts, and inevitably adds to its impact by aiding us to grasp difficult truths via more immediate and vivid imagery.

In addition to the use of imagery, Snow points to the adoption of the "authorial I", which makes Schopenhauer a more direct presence in his writings:

«Schopenhauer is always present to the reader. The "I" that speaks is invariably Schopenhauer himself. Not only does Schopenhauer make use of the first-person reflexive pronoun more frequently than do his contemporaries, but the reader rarely encounters a single page of texts where Schopenhauer is not clearly present»[32].

The constant use of "I" makes the writing feel more personal and immediate, such that you feel that it is aimed at you, and only you, as the reader. It also gives

[28] J. Snow, *Schopenhauer's Style*, «International Philosophical Quarterly», 33:4, 1993, p. 405.
[29] WWR2, p. 546.
[30] WWR2, p. 548.
[31] WWR2, p. 548.
[32] J. Snow, *Schopenhauer's Style*, cit., p. 405.

the text a more conversational, almost conspiratorial tone, in which we are being granted a glimpse into a controversial, but nevertheless revelatory, metaphysical system. With regard to his various discussions of other philosophers, assorted literature, and so forth, Schopenhauer adopts almost a tone of gossiping[33], which is bound to encourage the reader to listen to, and trust in, the author: as an example, «The fable of Pandora has never been clear to me, indeed, it has always struck me as absurd and perverse. I suspect that it was already misunderstood and twisted by Hesiod himself»[34]. In addition, Snow notes Schopenhauer's transition between being terse and loquacious, striking a confident tone and a more cautious one, depending upon the context, as well as the use of allusion, simile and metaphor[35].

Through constructing the presentation of his system in such a way in *WWR*, Schopenhauer believes that he will have a greater chance of inspiring both the theoretical and practical change that he wishes to see in the gifted few who are able to engage in genuine metaphysical reflection. The careful exposition of the system in his philosophical works uses all kinds of rhetorical tricks, as well as his conceptualisation of philosophical insight into the metaphysics of will, in order to ensure that he can have the greatest impact upon the reader as possible, ideally inspiring us to metaphysical reflection ourselves, such that we can also gain the same insights with their attendant theoretical and practical benefits. Snow, however, wishes to go beyond a simple description of Schopenhauer's writing-style, as we have offered here, by attempting to designate *WWR* as a particular kind of text, namely, as a meditation, along the lines of Descartes' *Meditations*. In defence of this view, he particularly emphasises Schopenhauer's use of the subjective standpoint:

«Schopenhauer writes a meditation. In fact, given his radically reflexive methodological posture, he could not help but write a meditation. Like the Descartes of the

[33] Such a tone is also manifested through the use of digression, which is a feature of ordinary conversation, but may strike us as an undesirable feature for any philosophical text: as Snow states, « [if] the reader is accustomed to a more terse presentation of philosophical argument, much of the text of Schopenhauer's main work will seem frustratingly digressive» (J. Snow, *Schopenhauer's Style*, cit., p. 406).
[34] A. Schopenhauer, *Parerga and Paralipomena, vol. 2*, ed. and trans. Del Caro & Janaway, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2015, p. 438 [PP2].
[35] J. Snow, *Schopenhauer's Style*, cit., p. 406.

Meditations, Schopenhauer appeals to a kind of experience, which, like our experience of ourselves as thinking things, is relentlessly and essentially first-personal»[36].

The difficulty I have with this view is that Schopenhauer's texts are so multi-faceted, with a variety of standpoints and rhetorical devices adopted, that it may be misleading to treat them as being one kind of text in particular. It may, indeed, be interesting to read some passages from Schopenhauer as drawing upon the meditative tradition in philosophy, but it will certainly be a stretch to conclude that this is a primary characterisation that we can grant to the kind of text that he writes. As an undeniably accomplished communicator, Schopenhauer draws upon a number of literary styles and devices in order to maximise the impact of his texts upon the reader[37]. Whilst there may be aspects of the meditative tradition that Schopenhauer draws upon, there are others which do not feature in his works, such as, for example, a clear time-frame for reflection, such as found in both Ignatius of Loyola and Descartes. Therefore, it is best, I argue, to recognise Schopenhauer as reflecting multiple literary styles in his work, without giving them a primary characterisation as "meditations" or anything else.

4. The role of illuminism

Another usual feature of esoteric texts is their tendency towards the mystical and speculative. Schopenhauer has been singled out in the past for engaging in speculative philosophising, particularly with regard to his identification of the thing-in-itself with will and his notion of the negation of the will[38]. The

[36] *Ibid.*, p. 408.

[37] As Segala notes, we can see Schopenhauer's recognition of the importance of writing-style in his work on *Parerga and Paralipomena*: with the more traditional form of systematic, formal writing of the first edition of *The World as Will and Representation* having found a limited audience, Schopenhauer explores a different style in *PP*, that of *Pöpularphilosophie*, with a view to having a great impact, particularly beyond the intelligentsia: «The choice of simple and colloquial style in the frame of essays and aphorisms allowed him to free his thought from the burden of the system and caught the favour of those who were looking for philosophy unaffected by philosophical vernacular» (M. Segala, *Additions and Omissions: the Genesis of* Parerga and Paralipomena *from Schopenhauer's Manuscripts*, «Schopenhauer Jahrbuch», 94, 2013, p. 257). Fortunately, for Schopenhauer, his choice of a strange title for the work, drawing upon ancient Greek, did not seem to deter the audience he craved.

[38] As an example, Hamlyn argues that Schopenhauer only demonstrates that the thing-in-itself is will on an unjustified assumption «that anything non-phenomenal must be beyond the phenomenal and is in some sense responsible for it» (D. Hamlyn, *Schopenhauer: The Arguments of the Philosophers*, Routledge, London 1980, p. 94).

potentially speculative nature of his views, particularly concerning the negation of the will, is addressed in a letter to David Asher from 1859. Schopenhauer starts with a rejection of the claim that his philosophy marks a «turn away from higher speculation and [a] move more or less towards faith»[39]. Though it might seem surprising that Schopenhauer is happy to be characterised as engaged in "higher speculation", what he wishes to emphasise through his rejection of this claim is that his ideas are very much within the realms of philosophy, not religion: that is, we should not read "speculation" in the pejorative sense, as he is happy to attribute to the Absolute Idealists, but in a more anodyne sense of simply trying to discern some metaphysical truths, whilst staying within the epistemic limits set by Kant. Indeed, in the same passage, after allowing that he engages in "higher speculation", he is keen to nevertheless affirm his Kantian credentials: «I, true to Kantian principles, do not speak about that of which neither I nor anyone else can know anything»[40]. So, Schopenhauer is happy to state that he engages in philosophical speculation, though at the same time observing Kantian epistemic limits without faith coming into his reflections.

Julian Young, as part of his "trichotomy interpretation", has argued for a very restrictive reading of Schopenhauer's claims regarding the cognitive limits of philosophy. He correctly points to the general theme of epistemic caution surrounding the metaphysical enterprise for Schopenhauer, who speaks of the «ultimately "negative"… character of philosophy, its inability, the inability of human reason in general, to know, or even *conceive*, the character of ultimate reality»[41]. Thus, if one wishes to resist Young's claim that Schopenhauer abandons any attempt at cognition of the world beyond representation, we will have to find an interpretation that nevertheless accounts for the "negative" character that he attributes to philosophy.

Young points to the significance of Schopenhauer's discussion of "illuminism" in this regard, to which we now turn. Schopenhauer distinguishes between rationalism and illuminism, which he glosses as «the use [respectively] of the objective and the subjective source of cognition», with the philosophical tradition moving from one to the other and back again, like «a pendulum swinging back

[39] A. Schopenhauer, *Schopenhauer's Letters to Dr. David Asher*, in Id., *Arthur Schopenhauer: New Material by Him and about Him by Dr. David Asher*, ed. and trans. Farrelly, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle Upon Tyne 2015, p. 15 [DA].
[40] DA, p. 15.
[41] J. Young, *Willing and Unwilling: A Study in the Philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer*, Martinus Nijhoff, Dordrecht 1987, p. 33.

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and forth»[42]. His attitude towards these two strands of thought in the history of philosophy are revealing regarding his views concerning the speculative nature of his own philosophy, insofar as he ultimately sides with rationalism, but with an interesting caveat.

Rationalism is the use of «intellect originally specified only for the service of the *will* and therefore directed *outwards*»[43], whilst illuminism, on the other hand, begins as an inwardly focused enterprise, taking as its organ, «inner illumination, intellectual intuition, higher consciousness, immediately cognitive reason, divine consciousness», in other words, a kind of «*inner* perception»[44]. The problem of trying to use inner perception to achieve insight, as illuminism attempts to do, is that it inevitably falls into mysticism, partly because anything cognizable by these means cannot be communicated. As language «[arose] for the purpose of the intellect's *outwardly* directed cognition, by means of its own abstractions», it is simply unable to capture any insight from inner perception, leaving us unable to fully communicate any potential insights from intuition. Given this, the inner cognition involved in illuminism is «indemonstrable, whereupon, hand in hand with scepticism, rationalism once again enters the field»[45]. If insights from illuminism are confined to one individual alone, and simply cannot be captured, even in an imperfect manner, by language, then rationalism will inevitably have the upper hand in the philosophical tradition. Rationalism and our language share a source in outer cognition and thus at least some form of rationalist philosophical discourse can take place amongst individuals.

Schopenhauer regards himself as standing within the rationalist tradition, on the basis that «philosophy should be *communicable* cognition, and must therefore be rationalism»[46]. However, Schopenhauer's stance is not altogether clear-cut, as he then immediately concedes that there is an element of illuminism in his philosophy:

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[42] PP2, p. 9.
[43] PP2, p. 9.
[44] A. Schopenhauer, *Parerga and Paralipomena, vol. 1*, ed. and trans. Roehr & Janaway, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2014, p. 3 [PP1].
[45] PP1, p. 3. As a further difficulty for illuminism, Schopenhauer states that «for *inner* perception there is no criterion of identity of the object of different subjects» (PP2, p. 10). The point seems to be that even if insights from illuminism could potentially be put into language, two speakers in a philosophical dialogue could never be certain that they are speaking of the same thing, and thus any such dialogue will inevitably be plagued with uncertainty and confusion.
[46] PP2, p. 11.

«[At] the end of my philosophy I have, to be sure, alluded to the field of illuminism as something that exists, but I guarded against taking even a single step into it; nor have I undertaken to provide ultimate conclusions about the existence of the world, but instead have gone only so far as is possible using objective, rationalist means. I have allowed illuminism to have its free space, where in its own way it might arrive at the solution to all riddles, without at the same time allowing it to block my path or giving it reason to polemicize against me»[47].

It seems that Schopenhauer is, at the teleological end-point of his philosophy, not necessarily shifting his stance in a fundamental way, from rationalism to illuminism, but at the very least coming up to the border between rationalism and illuminism by flirting with the kind of speculation that the latter indulges in and trying to communicate a potential insight which is ultimately incommunicable.

How can Schopenhauer, though, "allude to" illuminism without stepping into it? Clearly, at the same time as allowing some speculative aspect to his account, he wishes, by denying that he is providing "ultimate conclusions about the existence of the world", to stress that he has not allowed himself to indulge in the kind of nonsense speculation of the Absolute Idealists or of some religious thinkers. Schopenhauer makes his stance regarding rationalism and illuminism, such that he can allude to the latter without stepping into it, a little clearer in the following paragraph, where he writes:

«[It] may often be the case that a *hidden illuminism* lies at the basis of rationalism, at which then the philosopher looks as if at a hidden compass while purportedly making his way only by the stars, i.e. by external and clearly delineated objects, taking only these into consideration. This is admissible because he does not undertake to communicate incommunicable cognition, but instead his communication remains objective and rational. This may have been the case with Plato, Spinoza, Malebranche and many others; it should not concern anyone, for these are the *secrets of the heart*»[48].

Schopenhauer is clearly reiterating here that there is an element of illuminism in his philosophy. However, this quotation seems to reveal that a "hidden illuminism" might have an even larger role to play in his philosophy than he has admitted so far. Though a philosopher may, on the surface, be focusing in their philosophy on the "external and delineated objects" of rationalism, nevertheless

[47] PP2, p. 11.
[48] PP2, p. 11 – my emphases.

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they may be guided in their thoughts by an inner perception, which acts as a "hidden compass", showing the way towards genuine philosophical insight.

Schopenhauer's awareness of the importance of the meaning of the text beyond the surface content of what is being put across, as well as the manner in which philosophical reflection can point towards deep metaphysical truths, is reflected in his use of imagery concerning compasses: for example, he talks of a true philosophy as a «magnet that always and everywhere points to an absolutely determined point in the world»[49]. The imagery of a compass is also used in his early notes in relation to "better consciousness" (an early term for what he later calls the negation of the will): he writes that we can «maintain the better consciousness when not always present, indeed to preserve its pronouncements and make it the compass which navigates the ship of life even in the dark»[50]. Thus, even early on in his philosophical reflections, Schopenhauer allows for a mystical guide underlying our philosophical reflections (in this case, any cognition we may receive in relation to the better consciousness).

Elsewhere, Schopenhauer also speaks of a commitment to pessimism as offering a secure guide for our metaphysical reflections and attitude toward life in the world as representation:

> «In order to have a sure compass always in hand for finding out bearings in life, and in order to view life always in the proper light without ever going astray, nothing is more useful than to accustom oneself to regarding this world as a place of penance, hence as a prison, a penal colony as it were, a labour camp»[51].

The inner compass that points us towards "better consciousness" or "negation of the will" also brings with it a realisation of the parlous state of the world,

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[49] PP2, p. 15. Cross argues that Schopenhauer's admittance of a "hidden compass" as guiding his philosophical reflections, and thus ultimately giving some legitimate role to illuminism, is an aspect of his system which reveals the influence of Indian thought: «Outwardly he adopts, and with some rigour, the Western stance that philosophical investigation is the preserve of human reason, must work within its limits, and is quite distinct from "illuminism" or mysticism», but under the surface, «through cracks in his armour we see appearing the belief that the "inner illumination, intellectual intuition, higher consciousness" known to the mystics might be the true guiding light of the philosopher, the hidden compass», and of such a view of the relation between philosophy and mysticism, «[few] Indian thinkers, whether Buddhism or Hindu, would fail to agree with this» (S. Cross, *Schopenhauer's Encounter with Indian Thought: Representation and Will and Their Indian Parallels*, University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu 2013, p. 211).

[50] A. Schopenhauer, *Manuscript Remains: vol. 1*, trans. Payne, Berg, Oxford 1988, p. 48.

[51] PP2, p. 321.

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expressed in Schopenhauer's pessimism, and both of these realisations guide his philosophical thought throughout his works[52].

So, if this is what Schopenhauer is doing, then is his philosophy *really* rationalism, or is he in fact falling into illuminism, in the pejorative sense of high-flown, incommunicable speculation? Schopenhauer argues that it is his stance towards the communication of philosophy that stops him from indulging in unacceptable illuminism, in that he does not attempt to communicate the incommunicable. The picture that he seems to be painting of the relation between illuminism and rationalism in his philosophy, then, is rather complex. At the point where he is constructing his system, with a view to attempting to communicate his philosophy, Schopenhauer stands within the rationalist tradition, expressing his insights from an externally-orientated intellectual standpoint that will be recognisable to the philosophical reader who is familiar with the tradition, in particular that reader who understands the transcendental framework formulated by Kant. However, throughout this process, Schopenhauer is constantly referring what he expresses on the abstract, communicable level to a kind of inner perception, the intuitive insights, or "the secrets of the heart"[53], he has gained, to check that he has not gone too far astray from the truth, despite the imperfect way in which intuition translates into abstract concepts[54]. At the same time, he is checking his claims, in relation to evidence from the point of view of rationalism too (in particular, what we can learn from the examination of consciousness, in the manner of Kantian philosophy). It is this complex picture of constructing a philosophical system in concepts from an intuitive basis that, I argue, is what Schopenhauer is trying to capture in his carefully worded discussion regarding the mix of illuminism and rationalism in his philosophy[55].

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[52] App also writes of pessimism and the negation of the will as the "two poles" of Schopenhauer's philosophy, established early as an on-going guide for the construction and explication of his system in his philosophical works (U. App, *Schopenhauer's Compass: An Introduction to Schopenhauer's Philosophy and its Origins*, UniversityMedia, Wil 2014, pp. 11-15).

[53] As Schopenhauer states, «[depth] of thought finds its material within ourselves» (PP1, p. 51).

[54] Schopenhauer argues that language is based on concepts, which are imperfect abstractions of our immediate representations (see G. Neeley, *Schopenhauer: A Consistent Reading*, Edwin Mellen Press, Lampeter 2003, Ch. 3 for an in-depth discussion of Schopenhauer's theory of language).

[55] Schopenhauer's avowed incorporation of illuminism into his philosophy perhaps might not be that surprising given his often positive attitude towards mysticism: for example, at one point he praises Christian mystics for their «insight that the validity of all such kinds of knowledge is merely relative and conditioned» (PP2, p. 37), whilst rationalists place too much faith in the power of intellect.

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In particular, he is keen to emphasise that despite this illuminist element to his thought, he is nevertheless not engaging in the kind of speculation that he derides in others. As part of this, Schopenhauer wishes to maintain that his use of illuminism is unlike that of the Absolute Idealists: «Fichte's and Schelling's loud appeal to intellectual intuition and the impudent narration of its content, along with the claim for its objective validity, are shameless and reprehensible»[56]. Of course, his discussion here begs the question as to what it is that justifies his use of illuminism, whilst the Absolute Idealists are to be rejected for their forays into illuminism. The difference, he states, between his illuminism and that of others is that for them,

> «*illuminism* in and of itself is a natural and thus justifiable attempt to establish the truth. For the *outwardly* directed intellect, as mere organon for the purpose of the *will* and consequently merely secondary, is indeed only a *part* of our total human nature… What then can be more natural, when the objective cognizing intellect fails, than to seek help by putting into play one's entire remaining essence, which must also be the thing in itself, i.e., must belong to the true essence of the world and consequently harbour somehow the solution to all riddle?»[57].

The first point that Schopenhauer wishes to make is that, unlike other philosophers who use illuminism, he does not employ it on its own; rather, he uses it in the kind of interplay with rationalism that I described above. He understands the temptation, given the problems arising from rationalism (usually in the form of scepticism) to abandon the externally-directed intellect as the organ of philosophical reflection and instead rely upon illuminism alone. The temptations of illuminism become even greater when we reflect upon the fact that we have immediate cognition of ourselves «immediately, and of everything else only mediately», that the «immense external world has its existence only in the *consciousness* of cognizing beings», and that «when we go deep inside ourselves [we can] bring to consciousness that feeling of originality that lies in every knowing being», such that we recognize in ourselves «the true centre of the world, indeed, the primal source of all reality»[58]. When we compare the nature and content of our cognition of the external world with that of consciousness of ourselves, or, as Schopenhauer puts it, «inwardly directed attention»[59], the latter

[56] PP2, p. 321.
[57] PP2, pp. 11-12.
[58] PP2, pp. 17-18.
[59] PP2, p. 18.

naturally comes across as more impressive in offering direct, deep insight into the fundamental nature of things.

However, despite all this, the use of illuminism *alone* to achieve metaphysical truths is ultimately unjustified, presumably because we can achieve solid results through consideration of our own body and the world around us (as he shows through the exposition of his philosophy). Without some consideration of the more determinate objects of our outer perception, acting as an anchor that keeps us firmly weighted to the aspect of reality revealed in appearance, we can too easily fall into high-flown speculation, with the nonsensical results of the Absolute Idealists the consequence. As long as we take into account the «objective, intuitive apprehension of things», our philosophy cannot be «completely false, but instead is at worst only one-sided»[60]. Thus, illuminism and rationalism, when used properly, interact in a reciprocally supportive relationship, and Schopenhauer's philosophy attempts that balancing act which will ensure these two approaches can interact in a fruitful way such that any potential metaphysical results are as well-supported as possible.

Whilst illuminism can act as a "hidden compass" for rationalism, ensuring that our philosophy remains in contact with genuine, intuitive philosophical insight, rationalism, at the same time, stops illuminism from falling into nonsensical speculation. As far as Schopenhauer sees it,

> «[The] only proper and objectively valid way to execute something like this is to apprehend the empirical fact of the will that manifests itself inside us, indeed constitutes our sole essence, and to apply it to the explanation of objective external cognition… [The] path of illuminism [alone] does not lead to the goal».

Thus, though you may begin with philosophical considerations from inner perception of the kind that characterises an illuminist approach, you cannot justifiably stay there; rather, you have to ensure that these reflections are then applied to your external cognition, for the reasons given above. As such cognition does potentially yield metaphysical truths, there is no justification for ignoring it in your philosophical reflections, and that is what leads over-speculative thinkers astray. We can therefore see Schopenhauer's philosophy as attempting to model this kind of fruitful relation between rationalism and illuminism[61].

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[60] PP2, p. 13.

[61] One of the reasons, perhaps, for why Schopenhauer feels that he can incorporate an aspect of illuminism into his philosophy, even though it is strictly a form of rationalism, is the fact that

Schopenhauer's surprisingly positive appraisal of illuminism is recognized by Young, who states that, «Schopenhauer is not unsympathetic to the idea that there is experiential access to ultimate reality: a "sphere of illuminism" is accepted… the veridicality of mystical insight into another, ecstatic, world»[62]. Thus, «[what] Schopenhauer says about illuminism in *Parerga*, is not that it is a fairy-story invented by charlatans and humbugs, but rather that the deliverances of supersensible intuition are mystical»[63], and so are not communicable. The problem is that, as we have seen, philosophy should be communicable and thus cannot be illuminism. As such, Schopenhauer's objection to the Absolute idealists turns out to be «not that they have fabricated a faculty, but rather that they have no business bringing it into philosophy»[64]. The interpretation presented here, I argue, shows how Schopenhauer can legitimately bring illuminism into his metaphysics, whilst maintaining philosophy as an ultimately rationalist enterprise that is constrained by the limits of language and communication. Schopenhauer is attempting to tread a thin line in remaining within Kantian epistemic bounds, whilst claiming that we can have legitimate cognition that touches upon that which is beyond the world of experience, and this is further reflected in his nuanced conception of the interplay between illuminism and rationalism in his philosophy. It is in this sense that Schopenhauer's philosophy can be called speculative.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that *WWR* recognisably stands in the tradition of pedagogically esoteric works, as well as consciously engaging in reflection that at least touches upon the mystical and speculative. It is in fact Schopenhauer's reflections upon the manner in which philosophy can touch upon illuminism that led to (or even necessitated, in his view) his esoteric approach. The most important lesson of this for scholars of Schopenhauer is that we should approach his works with extra care, given his metaphilosophical self-understanding that allows him to use non-literal language and mystical leanings to produce a text that is anything but straightforward. Approaching Schopenhauer's philosophical

rationalism ends up, in its culmination in transcendental philosophy, as directed inward in a similar manner to the focus of illuminism on inner perception of some form.

[62] J. Young, *Willing and Unwilling*, cit., p. 34.

[63] *Ibid.*

[64] *Ibid.*

works, particularly *WWR*, as standing in the tradition of pedagogical esotericism, may also help us to reconceptualise his place in the history of philosophy. Schopenhauer's rejection of politically-focused forms of esotericism add to the view that his system is fundamentally anti-Enlightenment in tenor, in that he has abandoned any hopes for using his philosophical texts as a soft form of influence in guiding humanity towards an attainable goal of an enlightened society. In fact, we can view the pedagogical esoteric aspect of Schopenhauer's thought as revealing his deep kinship with ancient philosophical sources, both ancient Greek and Indian, that focus on individual development.

As Melzer notes, the endeavour to achieve literalness in philosophical texts is a relativity recent development from the 17th century, whereas more ancient sources, noting the difficulties facing genuine philosophical education, recognised the use of a variety of literary resources as proper to philosophical writing:

> «[They] endorsed and explored the profound intuition – found everywhere outside the modern West – that the whole enterprise of using books for the transmission of philosophic wisdom is an extraordinarily difficult (and possibly futile) undertaking that, when pursued, requires rhetorical techniques extending well beyond the contemporary ethic of literalness and clarity»[65].

It was only with the dawn of early modern thinkers, such as Bacon and Hobbes, that, philosophical discourse «gave new and fundamental importance to certainty and exactness», leading to «the adoption of artificially designed way of thinking and speaking»[66]. Further, such thinkers were generally mistrustful of the use of the rhetorical devices of the past, believing that they were ultimately being used to foster illusion and superstition, and not helping to reveal deep insights, in contradiction to pedagogical esotericism. Schopenhauer reacts strongly against such an approach, believing that the use of rhetoric is necessary to promote philosophical engagement, and the fostering of genuine metaphysical truths. In his esoteric approach, then, he shows his links with ancient Greek and Indian philosophy, at the expense of any influence from his Enlightenment forebears.

Of course, one can overstate the esoteric elements of Schopenhauer's philosophical works, and I would not wish to state that he has entirely left the essence of the Enlightenment behind: for one thing, his approach draws upon

[65] A. M. Melzer, *Philosophy Between the Lines*, cit., p. 208.
[66] *Ibid.*, p. 209.

Kant and the British Empiricist tradition too much for that to be the case. There are some elements of esotericism, broadly conceived, that are not aspects of Schopenhauer's philosophical approach. For one thing, there is no sense in which Schopenhauer consciously intends to spread falsehoods or "noble lies" (what Melzer calls a "protective" esotericism, such as that found in Plato's *Republic*[67]), nor does he withhold the fruits of his philosophical reflections entirely, as long as one has the patience to read through and reflect upon his works. However, I argue that there is enough of the pedagogical esoteric approach in his texts for this topic to be worthy of attention, and as a potential promising avenue of future research. Schopenhauer certainly does not revel in the inevitable obscurity of his works, and, as we have seen, he wishes that his philosophy could spread further. He is keen to not overuse the rhetorical elements of his work, in that he certainly does not wish to foster superstition and illusion amongst his readers; rather, he is simply doing all he can to mitigate the limits of conceptualisation, language and communication[68].

[67] See *ibid.*, p. 192.

[68] I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this journal and an audience at Lehigh University for their useful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

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